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ABSTRACT

This study examined the dual roles of continued close ties with the Cuban community and culture of origin, as well as influences of print and broadcast media, in the development of attitudes toward both type and propensity toward eating disorders among young Cuban-American women. Continued exclusive or primary use of Spanish language in the home, as well as frequent consumption of Cuban meals were associated with lower (less problematic) scores on the Eating Attitudes Test (EAT). Regular attendance at parties and social functions attended primarily by Cubans did not appear related to lower scores on the EAT. Unlike some previous studies, no relationship was found between levels of media exposure and propensity toward eating disorders as measures by the EAT. (Author)

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Acculturation, Media Exposure, and Eating Disorders in Cuban American Women

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This study examined the dual roles of continued close ties with the Cuban community and culture of origin, as well as influences of print and broadcast media, in the development of attitudes toward body type and propensity toward eating disorders among young Cuban-American women. Continued exclusive or primary use of Spanish language in the home, as well as frequent consumption of Cuban meals were associated with lower (less problematic) scores on the Eating Attitudes Test (EAT). Regular attendance at parties and social functions attended primarily by Cubans did not appear related to lower scores on the EAT. Unlike some previous studies, no relationship was found between levels of media exposure and propensity toward eating disorders as measured by the EAT.

The prevalence and increase in eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia among young women in the U.S. presents a formidable challenge. While a number of studies have examined factors associated with eating disorders among Caucasian women, far less attention has been paid to other women, even though several reviews of the literature suggest that eating disorders are also increasing among minority groups in the United States (Hsu, 1987; Root, 1990). Yet in spite of evidence that eating disorders are increasing among all women, there may be important group differences in etiology and mitigating factors as well.

The research which has examined Hispanic and Caucasian differences in eating disorders has been equivocal, with several studies finding similar incidence rates (Gross & Rosen, 1988; Hiebert et al., 1988), and others finding Hispanics to be both heavier and less concerned with their weight than Caucasians (Harris & Koehler, 1992). However, in spite of the fact that a prior study found a significant relationship between acculturation and scores on the Eating Attitudes Test (EAT) among Hispanic teenagers (Pumariega, 1986), researchers have not generally looked closely at the role of acculturation, or at the loss of close identification with a Hispanic culture of origin, as a mediator in accounting for group differences.

Ideal body type, as portrayed in the media, appears to play a large part in influencing women's perceptions of the desirability of their own body shape and weight. Irving (1990) showed women slides of thin, average, and heavy models, and found that when presented with slides of thin models, the participants exhibited a decrease in both self-esteem and satisfaction

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with their own weight. Even the role of Barbie, with her full-size-equivalent 18 inch waist, is finally being acknowledged as problematic, and after decades of sending a powerful message to very young girls, the doll is being revised to a somewhat more realistic body shape.

Yet these media messages continue, and in spite of "new" Barbie, the ideal weight portrayed in the media generally continues to decrease (Garner, et al., 1980; Pyle, et al., 1980). Women today are influenced through increased food and diet advertisements as well (Gray, Mosimann & Ahrens, 1992), and a recent study (Anderson & DiDomencio, 1992) found that compared to men's magazines, women's magazines contained 10.5 times more advertisements dealing with diet and weight loss.

This study examined the dual roles of media and acculturation in the development of attitudes regarding body type and propensity toward eating disorders among young Cuban-American women.

Method

Participants

Eighty seven young women, ages 18-25 (Mean age=21.1, SD=2.7), all self identified as Cuban American, were recruited from a variety of settings in the Miami Florida area. Subjects were primarily recruited from classes at two universities in the Miami area, one, a large public institution, the other, a small Catholic university. Participants from these sources represented both graduate and undergraduate students, and between them, comprised over 75% of the sample. Some additional participants were recruited from the local Cuban community, and were generally acquaintances of the researchers or their associates.

Miami provided a useful and somewhat unique setting for this study, as there is a large and very diverse Cuban community. The women in this study spanned a broad range, coming from families ranging from quite insular and traditional to very acculturated.

Measures

In addition to demographic information, there were three primary measures used in this study. They included The Media Exposure Scale (Strice et al., 1994), which asks participants to record the amount of several types of media they have been exposed to during the previous month. One subscale for magazines and another for television allows differentiation between these two primary sources. The second, the Eating Attitudes Test - 26 (EAT-26) (Garner et al., 1982) investigates beliefs and attitudes associated with eating behaviors and eating disorders. This somewhat shortened version of the original 40 question EAT (Garner, D.M., & Garfinkel, P.E., 1979) has proven a reliable and robust instrument, losing little from the reduction in length, and is highly correlated to the original EAT-40 (r=.98). The final measure, an adapted version of the Cuban Behavioral Identity Questionnaire (CBIQ) (Garcia & Lega, 1979), asks subjects to report the frequency with which they participate in a variety of traditionally Cuban-ethnic behaviors, and the degree to which they are familiar with idiomatic Cuban expressions and culture. This fourth section, which consisted of specific questions about Cuba itself and Cuban idiomatic speech, was discarded when few of the young participants in this study were able to answer even 10% of the questions. The CBIQ served here as a measure of how much Cuban ethnic identity has been retained by the participants.

Procedures

Participants were provided written informed consent before completing the questionnaires. Questionnaires consisting of the three scales described above, as well as demographic information, were anonymously administered, and only those reporting ages in the target range (18-25) were utilized for the study. The largest part of the questionnaires were completed in classes at the two universities by permission of the instructors, and the others were completed on an individual basis. Three questionnaires were unusable due to the age of the participants (outside the study guidelines), and the eighty four which were utilized in the final analysis represented a successful completion and inclusion rate in excess of 95%. Following completion of the questionnaires, all participants who were interested in the study were provided further information, and an opportunity to receive a copy of the results.

Results

Cuban Identity

Continued close identification with Cuban identity and activities appears to play a part in lower EAT-26 scores. Those participants who reported the use of Spanish as the primary language at home, had significantly lower ($p<.05$) EAT-26 scores than those who used primarily English at home. As can be seen in Table 1, those eating a number of traditionally Cuban meals on a frequent basis, had lower EAT-26 scores as well. Socializing and attending parties with primarily Cuban participants appeared to have little effect on EAT-26 scores.

Table 1
Summary of Simultaneous Regression Analysis of Cuban Identity and Media Variables on EAT-26 Scores (n=84)

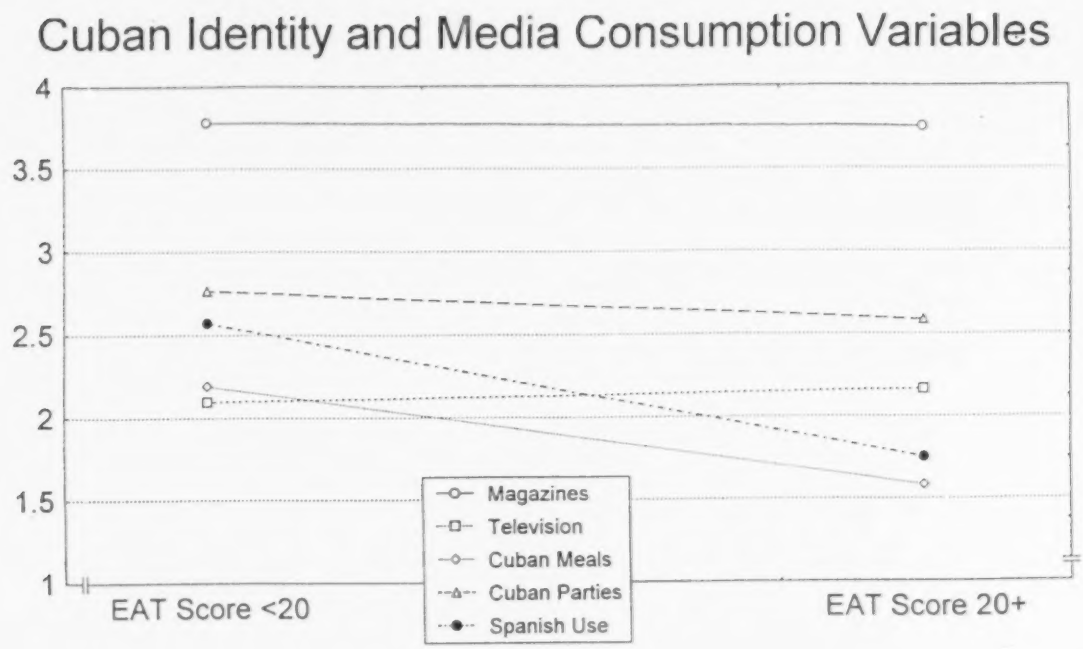
Variable	*B*	*SE B*	β	p-level
Magazines	.26	.50	.06	.61
TV	1.04	1.06	.11	.33
Meals	-1.46	1.05	-.17	.17
Parties	.93	.94	.11	.33
Spanish	-3.27	1.43	-.29	.02

Note: The full regression model accounted for 14% (adjusted $R^2 = .09$) of the variance, $F(5,78) = 2.62$, $p<.03$, Standard Error of estimate: 8.70

Media Exposure

Unlike a number of previous studies, there appeared to be no relationship between media exposure and the predisposition to eating disorders. Regardless of type (health, fitness, & beauty magazines or television) and quantity of exposure, little difference was found in EAT-26 scores.

Figure 1



Discussion

It appears that continuing identification with and participation in several aspects of Cuban-Hispanic culture may serve as a significant mitigating factor in predisposition and development of eating disorders. The roles of language and foods of culture of origin seem to be most salient in maintaining this "protective factor." As this participation in Cuban-Hispanic "home" culture dissipates, this protection appears reduced, as women expressing low participation in these activities manifest higher EAT-26 scores, and appear to be at higher risk for developing eating disorders.

As most of the women in this study were young and unmarried, they typically continue to live at home (a Cuban cultural norm in this community and others). In family structures such as these, significant family influences would seem likely to persist to a more advanced age than is often common in some other American cultures. Indeed, the two areas in this study which seem most salient, eating traditionally Cuban meals (presumably primarily at home) and the use of Spanish as the primary language of the home, would suggest that these two variables are enmeshed in continued close identification with and participation in family activities. The general role of this more protracted and close family influence cannot be discounted, and future research should examine the role of cultural family attitudes regarding eating, and on the development of attitudes toward acceptable body type, more thoroughly and specifically.

Other within-group social contacts taking place outside the home, e.g. parties attended primarily by other Cubans, did not appear to affect attitudes toward eating and body image, further suggesting that the home environment provides perhaps the most powerful influences in this area.

It is also important to note that while prior researchers have called for closer investigation of specific sub-groups within the Hispanic population, this has rarely been done. As a result, it is difficult to say how generally applicable these results may prove to other Hispanic populations. We reiterate the need to examine more closely *specific* groups within this and other ethnic and cultural groups prior to possibly over-generalizing results and conclusions.

Hopefully, researchers will continue to seek, examine, refine, and take advantage of a growing knowledge of specific cultural strengths and protective factors in both this and other areas as well.

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